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D'var Torah: Yom Kippur 5782
Israel: talk and t'shuvah

The High Holy Days, and the month of Elul leading up to them, are our season of cheshbon hanefesh, taking account of the soul. It's hard, but necessary work: looking through our own deeds and intentions, assessing how we've done. What did we do well? What might we want to do differently? Which healthy relationships have we nurtured? Have we caused pain to anyone, on purpose or by accident? Cheshbon hanefesh requires honesty with ourselves. It also takes a measure of de-centering ourselves, acknowledging that we have significant impact on others and cannot say that, objectively, we matter more than they do. One of our community's practices these past couple of years has been Elul writing, where we use different schemas—shofar calls, the four words from the Song of Songs (Ani L'dodi V'dodi Li) of which *Elul* is an acronym—to guide us through the four weeks of Elul. The stories and insights that emerge are extraordinary. I always leave my own Elul practice feeling tender and also open, ready for what the next year brings. I have never yet found that the acts of t'shuvah—apology and restoration—that Elul asks of me have damaged my sense of myself as a person. On the contrary, it's good to be able to make a mistake and then acknowledge and work to repair it. I'm not God.

Cheshbon hanefesh is not for Elul only! It originated as a Mussar practice—studying Divine attributes in order to try and emulate them. A book, *Cheshbon HaNefesh* by Menachem Mendel Lefin of Satanov, was published in 1808, in which he encouraged people to journal to study thirteen middot.¹ Rabbi Satanover was partly inspired by reading Ben Franklin's plans for self-improvement in his autobiography! Cheshbon hanefesh is, then, both a Jewish and an American tradition.

Cheshbon hanefesh and t'shuvah are worth it for us because they increase our ability to be good, functional human beings with the capacity for growth.

Israel is an important part of Jewish identity for most American Jews. Whether in pride, in opposition, in longing, in anger, or in hope, almost all of us feel strongly connected to Israel. We can't vote there. Some of us may never have visited there. But we have a stake in her.

If Israel is important to us, then cheshbon hanefesh is an important practice for us as it relates to Israel. Cheshbon hanefesh regarding our own feelings about Israel and reactions to Israel helps us process our personal and communal relationships with Israel, and keep them healthy. This Yom Kippur, I want to invite us to talk with each other, as Naomi Shemer sings, about the honey AND the sting, the bitter and the sweet.²

The Israeli Minister of Diaspora Affairs, Nachman Shai, wrote an astonishing piece³ published in the Times of Israel on September 2, aimed at diaspora Jewish communities. He called it, "I know Israel has let you down. We are doing teshuvah—repentance." Shai appeals to clergy and religious leaders to have exactly this conversation with our communities, because Israel and Jews of the diaspora need each other. "Israel needs your clarity and backbone to empower us to make the bold decisions that will ensure our continuity as both a Jewish and democratic state. We need your justice-minded values to assure Israelis that moving toward two states for two peoples is the only solution, both for our security and our soul. We have room to be inspired by your models of pluralism and diversity, and of organized Jewish communal life within our own religious practice." He writes, "Tell them that we believe in you and that we are ready for both your critique and your ideas."

This is a sitting minister of the Israeli government speaking, asking for our help. To partner with Israel in the kind of productive, loving relationship he envisions, we, as a community of diaspora Jews, need to develop those critiques and those ideas. If you believe, as I do, that t'shuvah is helpful in the context of the Israel/diaspora Jewish relationship, then we need to do communal cheshbon hanefesh in order to help Israel do that t'shuvah. I also think that this process is crucial to our lives here, as Jews in America, who are increasingly fielding critiques of Israel, whether we want to or not, that **don't** come from a place of love and connection. Cheshbon hanefesh is a resource for us.

We don't do cheshbon hanefesh and strive for t'shuvah to condemn or dump on ourselves. We do it to love ourselves better to lift up—both the good and the growing edges. And we do it to stay in truer relationship with our goals and values. Cheshbon hanefesh is a personal process, rooted in "I" statements and lived experience, not speaking for anyone else, and attempting to avoid value

judgments. It's a process of honest discernment, clarification, and improvement. We can use this process with ourselves, as part of our relationships to Israel. Indeed, I think we must.

This spring, during the war between Israel and Hamas, our temple did not craft and publish statements about our “position” on the violence. Instead, I and Rabbi Rachel gave divrei Torah in Shabbat services, deliberately keeping our communication in live formats where we could see and hear people respond. And I spoke individually with different members of our community. I called to check in on some who I knew had strong personal feelings about Israel and Palestine, or family in Israel and/or Palestine, and doubtless there are people I missed, and I am sorry for that. But for about two weeks, in almost every conversation I had with a congregant, regardless of initial topic, I asked the person, “How are you doing with all of this?” *All of this* being the situation, as an Israeli would say, “hamatzav.” How are you feeling as devastating violence unfolds and, at the same time, coverage of Israel in mainstream American news media shifts—perhaps permanently—to a far more critical stance? I wanted then, as I want now, to hear from you, how you felt, what questions you were wrestling with. I want to accompany you in those questions.

Here is what I heard. I heard terror for relatives and friends in Israel who were under fire. I heard terror for relatives and friends in Palestine who were under fire. I heard that Israel's actions were justified and that the disproportionate criticism she came in for was antisemitic. I heard that Israel's actions towards Palestinians were genocidal. I heard grief for the children dying, Palestinian and Israeli. I heard horror and fear at the volume of Hamas rockets. I heard shock and shame at Israel sending troops into the Al-Aqsa Mosque on the eve of Eid al-Fitr, a religious service with a similar function to our S'l'ichot. I heard deep anger that Israel's right as a country to defend herself against acts of terrorism was reported on as if it were a political statement or bargaining chip, rather than a no-brainer.

Many of us were scared about the increasing acts of antisemitism in America (and elsewhere) that tracked so clearly with the start of the war and the start of more critical coverage of Israel in the news. Many of us spoke with anger about suddenly being asked by people who aren't Jewish (friends, family, coworkers, fellow students) to explain Israel's actions. Many of us felt both

unprepared and unwilling to be asked for American Judaism's Take on Israel, by people who, friendly or not, wanted quick answers and a sound bite. There is complexity and weight to Israeli/Palestinian history, the simultaneous threat that Israel is always under and the acts of occupation, repression, and war that she does engage in. I heard that those deserve fuller conversation than what the moment seemed to limit us to.

What I also heard over and over, consistently, was fear of that fuller conversation, because the conversations you were and weren't having were so tough already. When I talked with you, our members, on the phone, your voices went soft and tired when this topic began. "It's so hard to talk about this." "I feel like I can't talk about this because nobody else feels the way I do." "I'm not an expert on Israeli history, how can I give my opinion?" "I've tried to talk about it, but everyone is so angry." "I hear my progressive friends condemning Israel and I feel like they're all going to jump on me if I speak up and tell them it's not that simple." "I want to talk about it, but I worry that I'm only going to give Israel a bad name, and isn't there enough antisemitism already out there without feeding it?" Clergy also share your fears.

I heard all of this in our community, and I am reporting it back to you today so that you can hear it also and feel the texture of threads connecting our community members and the Holy Land. Amplifying and reflecting your voices is my privilege as your cantor. But I believe we can hear these things directly from one another, not just from the bimah. Our communal weave is strong enough. Our ability to listen with love rather than rancor to one another is deep enough. I want to invite you, this Yom Kippur, to make open conversation about Israel and Palestine with other members of our community a more regular part of your lives.

Our feelings were, and are, running high. But if we fear honest and complex conversation about Israel and Palestine so much that we don't have that conversation—in our homes, with our friends, with fellow students and congregants—then we choke off our potential for a fuller relationship with the Land. If a young person in our community never hears more than a whisper of the appalling conditions in Gaza, never talks about settlements and where the Green Line was, and then when they get to college are confronted by someone who feels that Israel has lost her right to exist, how can that young person be clear enough in their own heart to respond

confidently? If a passionate advocate for Palestinian rights never hears firsthand from someone who has experienced violent antisemitism, how miraculous the establishment of the Israeli State was and is, that suddenly there was a place in the world where Jews could go and be welcomed and defended, how can that advocate understand that every rocket fired from Gaza carries echoes of the threat of existential destruction? How can we understand for ourselves the despair and urgency of so many Palestinians, if we don't know that in Hebron, the main economic artery is closed to Palestinian vehicles, and that on Purim and Yom Yerushalayim, mobs of settlers protected by the Israeli army roam the streets throwing bottles at Palestinian windows?

My friends, these are conversations we need to have with each other and with our loved ones, because I believe that, more and more, we are going to be asked to have them with other Americans who may be less personally invested in the topic. We need to be able to talk openly about Israel, in her fullness. The process of cheshbon hanefesh is here for us. We can and should talk more about the ways Israel makes us heartstoppingly proud. We can kvell over and trumpet Israeli creativity and innovation, Israeli survival and resilience, Israeli culture, Israeli diversity. We can heave sighs of twinned relief and awe at Israel's efficient vaccination rollout. We can marvel that Israel is a unique country that runs on Jewish time, located in the birthplace of Jewish history, a place where Jewish holiday and ritual and food observances are part of the majority culture, not the minority. As Temple past president Lynn Martin said of coming to Temple—in most other contexts you have to explain about Judaism, what it is, how it works. When you come in these doors, you can leave that stuff behind. “Everyone gets it.” Israel is the country where you don't have to explain Judaism to anyone. We can share our own experiences in Israel and Palestine, of traveling and living, learning and contributing, eating and praying and loving. Israel grabs me, roots me, expands me. I look forward to the day when I can bring my family back there and, God willing, a Temple Emanu-El group. Israel is unique in this world.

Israel is also worth the harder conversations. We can and should talk about times and ways where many of us feel Israel has missed the mark. We can talk about our different reactions to the forced isolation and disenfranchisement of Palestinians in and around Israel, settlement encroachment, areas of Palestinian control sprinkled like sand grains throughout the West Bank, throttling free movement and economic development. We can talk about the storming of the Al-

Aqsa Mosque. We can talk about what it felt like to be Jewish in America this summer. We can talk about Baruch Goldstein, an American-Israeli terrorist who fatally attacked Muslim worshippers in the Ibrahimi Mosque in 1994, and why his tomb stands like a shrine in a Hebron city park, with the words “clean hands and a clear heart” engraved on it, and why his Kahanist party has a seat again in the Knesset. We can talk about what it's like to hear Hamas and the Islamic Front chant “From the river to the sea” and know that the desire to erase Israel and its Jews is real and violent and must be defended against, and yet—also—grieve and feel shame over Palestinians growing up behind barriers that hinder access to enough food, education, clean water, medical care, and jobs. We can take an honest accounting of the d'vash and the oketz, the honey and the sting.

I love Israel. I've been there only once but she is integral to my sense of my own Judaism. My Jewish heart will always respond to the Land and to the people who dwell upon her. My heart cracked this spring.

From the conversations I had with you, my experience wasn't unique. Communities have practice sharing both grief and love. Let's use those muscles. I don't want you ever to feel fear at the prospect of a conversation about Israel and Palestine. I want you to feel that your Temple community is a safe place to have those conversations and has prepared you for having them in other contexts.

Our Temple Emanu-El community has an incredible structure that supports our practice of talking about Israel. We have an ongoing Israel Chavurah that meets once a month, a place for people to come and talk with each other about Israel. It's been going so long that for some of you it may feel like old news, but I'll tell you, when I was first looking at our temple's website as I applied to work here, I almost jumped out of my desk chair with excitement and admiration when I saw Israel Chavurah listed. “They talk about Israel?” I thought. “Every month, they talk about Israel?” Israel Chavurah is here for you. And later this year I hope to put together a story exchange, for us to hear and try on each other's experiences of Israel. If you have other ideas of how you'd like our congregation to learn about and engage with Israel and Palestine, please let me know; I'd love your input.

The Zionist Theodor Herzl said of Israel, even before she became a nation-state: “Im tirtzu, ein zo agadah.”⁴ “If you will it, it's no legend.” Israel is not a story anymore that lives only in the longing of our liturgy. For me, I say “Thank God” for this. It is flesh and blood, earth and water, a modern political nation-state. Here in this world. This means that we have both the right and the responsibility, as Jews who care about what Israel does, to consider her actions from the perspective of universal human rights. For the sake of Israelis, for the sake of Palestinians, for all people. And for our own sake, for our Jewish American n'shamot. To know ourselves, and Israel, better, and to help make her t'shuvah possible.

She and we are both worth it.

G'mar chatimah tovah.

Notes

1. Micha Berger, “Lists of Middos,” Aspaqlaria, March 3, 2010; updated January 5, 2012, <https://www.aishdas.org/asp/lists-of-middos>.
2. Naomi Shemer, “Al Kol Eileh,” 1980.
3. Nachman Shai, “I know Israel has let you down. We are doing teshuvah—repentance,” *Times of Israel*, September 2, 2021, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/i-know-israel-has-let-you-down-we-are-doing-teshuvah-repentance/>
4. Theodor Herzl, Yiddish epigraph translated into modern Hebrew and appended to Nahum Sokolow's 1903 Hebrew translation of Herzl's German novel *Altneueland* (Leipzig: Hermann Seeman Nachfolger, 1902)